

The Newton Rezoning Effort

As architects, builders, and residents of Newton, we are committed to maintaining the quality of life in our city. After spending considerable time and effort examining the current rezoning effort, we have found serious problems in the proposed code. We urge Newton residents to become informed about this crucial issue and how it will affect all of us. Here are some of our findings:

Flawed Thinking

- It is ill-advised and inappropriate to enact dramatic changes while we are still grappling with the impact of COVID-19. We don't yet know what long-range effects the pandemic will have on us. Will the current trends—working from home, reduced use of public transport, leaving high-density living for more space, etc.—continue or shift?
- No comprehensive study has been presented evaluating or demonstrating the impact of the proposed code's significant changes to land use. Any proposals and possible impacts need to be presented in a form understandable to residents.
- In addition, using form-based zoning derived from cities very different from our own is inappropriate and could be seriously detrimental to our community.

Density Matters

- The proposed zoning would lead to an alarming increase in density. Allowing conversions of existing residences to create up to 6 residential units on a lot would totally transform Newton's much cherished status as the "Garden City." So would the Planning Department's proposal to transform all single-family zones into two-family zones.
- Allowing multi-family conversions "by right" throughout Newton would totally change the character of our neighborhoods. The proposed rezoning would not even provide abutters the ability to raise objections to multi-family conversions since no special permit process is included.
- Allowing such Increase in density would create crippling new infrastructure demands on schools, city services, and streets. In addition, the permitted housing boom will mean a lot more cars and a lot more pavement and will certainly reduce our green space.
- More multi-unit housing does not automatically make the cost of housing more affordable. It does, however, encourage more development. And when has new construction ever cost less than the equivalent existing properties?

Size Matters

- The proposed code sets a maximum allowed footprint area for houses, measured in square feet. This footprint restriction will limit livable space on the ground floor, making aging in place or caring for older loved ones more challenging.

- The removal of minimum lot size in the proposed zoning will also lead to more narrow homes. Parcels will be reconfigured to create more housing lots, leading to homes more crowded together.
- Along with the removal of minimum lot size, the rezoning proposal also seeks to reduce the minimum lot frontage. This would allow homes to be more easily demolished by a developer, who could then subdivide the land and put up two or more houses in the same space.

Conclusion

The current code is not perfect, but we believe that strategic, incremental modifications to the existing zoning code are a more effective way to improve and rectify Newton’s housing issues. This approach can preserve the unique nature of our neighborhoods and allow for reasonable and controlled growth. Recommendations include:

- Allow remodeling of spaces in existing structures such as attics and basements without a complex and lengthy special permit process. This approach is especially important when more and more residents want home offices or space for sharing their home with elders.
- Allow for reasonable additions to existing homes to help homeowners remain in their homes and accommodate needs such as extended-family living and working from home.
- Add a provision, as needed, to allow existing non-conforming lots to be easier to build on.

Now is the time to speak up! In the upcoming election, we need city councilors who want to maintain the character, charm, and livability of our villages, not “upzone” them for large, multi-story developments. We hope all Newton residents will support candidates who pledge to work with our existing code and not risk the unintended consequences of a radical, untested, unproven new zoning code.

Signed,

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